

Opinion

Is China a Colonial Power?

By James A. Millward

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The Yantai Railway Station in China's Shandong Province. Tang Ke/Xinhua, via Getty Images

In a lesser-known novel, “Claudius Bombarnac,” Jules Verne describes the adventures of the titular foreign correspondent as he rides the “Grand Transasiatic Railway” from the “European frontier” to “the capital of the Celestial Empire.” A cast of international characters, by turns comical,

curious and shady, accompanies the French reporter by train from the Caspian Sea to Peking, narrowly escaping bandits and delivering a mysterious cargo.

When first published in 1893, the book was futuristic fiction. There was no continuous rail link across Eurasia. There still isn't, but 125 years later China now envisions financing and building multiple such overland routes (with much faster trains). That's for the "belt" portion of what it calls the "One Belt, One Road" initiative: It is also developing a string of new ports, from the South China Sea through the Indian Ocean to Africa and the Mediterranean.

The number and scale of the projects proposed are breathtaking, far surpassing even the imagination of a sci-fi writer. They have stimulated awe and, more often, dark suspicions among many foreign observers.

Just after Verne was writing, China's first main railways were being built by Western companies, financed by Western loans to a nearly bankrupt Qing dynasty. Within two decades, struggles over foreign ownership of Chinese rail had touched off a revolution that brought down the dynasty in 1912. Today, the former victim of Western railway imperialism is lending billions to [countries throughout Asia, Africa and Europe](#) to construct not only railroads but also highways, ports, power plants and other infrastructure.

China's economic progress over the past century has been phenomenal, lifting hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty. So when the Chinese government offers to share its experience in development — [a prominent theme in its official speeches and documents](#) — it should be taken seriously.

But the historical echoes are worrisome. Already, Sri Lanka, unable to pay back the \$8 billion it owes Chinese state-owned enterprises for building major infrastructure on its territory, has agreed [to lease its port in Hambantota to China for 99 years](#). That is precisely the term for which another strategic port, [Hong Kong](#), was leased by the Qing to the British in circumstances that epitomize colonialism.

So one wonders: Is China presenting a new model of development to a world that could use one, or is One Belt, One Road itself the new colonialism?

Because these rail and other projects require security, they extend the Chinese government's political reach into Central Asia, Pakistan and the

Middle East. And as Beijing turns the South China Sea into a vast game of Go, its new ports in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and, potentially, [the Maldives](#) start to look like still more playing tokens.

Vision for a Linked Hemisphere

China is seeking to develop a vast network of projects in countries throughout Asia, Africa and Europe. Here is an approximation of land and sea routes that could make up what China is calling its “One Belt, One Road” initiative.



China’s pretty talk of development and cooperation sounds like cover for a strategic advance, and of course it is that. But besides investing financially in infrastructure, One Belt, One Road also invests China’s prestige in a globalist message that sounds all the right notes — peace, multicultural tolerance, mutual prosperity — and that rhetoric sets standards by which to hold China accountable.

The Chinese government has rolled out the initiative with fanfare, casting it as President Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy project, and outsiders have in turn treated it as a monolithic venture. In fact, it is made up of many elements: cultural, diplomatic, developmental, as well as commercial and strategic. You can’t give thumbs up or thumbs down to the whole package, because One Belt, One Road is nothing less than the rebranding of China’s entire foreign policy, in all its complexity.

For example, complementing the initiative’s harder edge is a cultural component that observers often overlook: numerous school programs, cultural exchanges, art shows, museum exhibitions, musical performances, dance concerts, archaeological explorations and Unesco collaborations. These extensions of Chinese soft power play on the idea of the Silk Road, that mythical ancient golden age of untrammelled trade and cross-cultural synergy. In fact, there never really was a single Silk Road (nor several roads) linking East to West that you could draw on a map; rather, trade fanned out in networks across the breadth of Eurasia — as it did elsewhere. And machinations of empires always played a larger role in promoting exchanges than did intrepid private traders.

But the idea of the Silk Road (unlike, say, the idea of the “Great Game”) is nonthreatening, a sepia-tinged vision of camels and bazaars full of exotic luxuries. China has cleverly pinned its foreign policy to a pleasant historical myth that unites the peoples of Afro-Eurasia. It is a fable that

can literally be told as a bedtime story about “sharing” and giraffes.

To the cynical, this is just so much propagandistic treacle. But China is also now loudly speaking the language of international development; it has announced that it is stepping up to be a global good citizen concerned about the economic well-being of its neighbors. Sincere or not, the message is at least supranational, in stark contrast to the protectionism and xenophobia displayed by President Trump and emerging nationalistic ideologies in Europe, India and elsewhere.

The George W. Bush administration’s 2005 call for China to become a [“responsible stakeholder”](#) in world affairs may have been patronizing, but it was also forward-looking. One Belt, One Road is Beijing’s full-throated answer to that challenge — even if it asserts China’s independence from an America-centered world order, rather than a convergence with it.

Is a new approach, by a new player, such a bad thing? The economic orthodoxy long imposed by the United States-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund on developing countries in crisis — a reform package known as the Washington Consensus — has enjoyed a mixed record at best. And in Africa, for example, Western investment remains small, given the continent’s size, population and needs.

China, for its part, has embraced Africa. Although some of its projects have coddled corrupt dictators in order to haul off African raw materials, others have delivered concrete economic benefits locally. Moreover, some Chinese government and corporate investors have proved willing to take risks that Western corporations and countries have consistently avoided.


Some of China’s Silk Road projects will be boondoggles. Some will produce economic benefits. Some may be effective at reducing poverty. Some will promote Chinese state and corporate interests. One Belt, One Road, with its many faces, is neither a nefarious plot for world domination nor the answer to all the world’s problems. We should evaluate its projects individually and hold them to the goal that the broader initiative has set for itself: to build a better future modeled on an idealized past.

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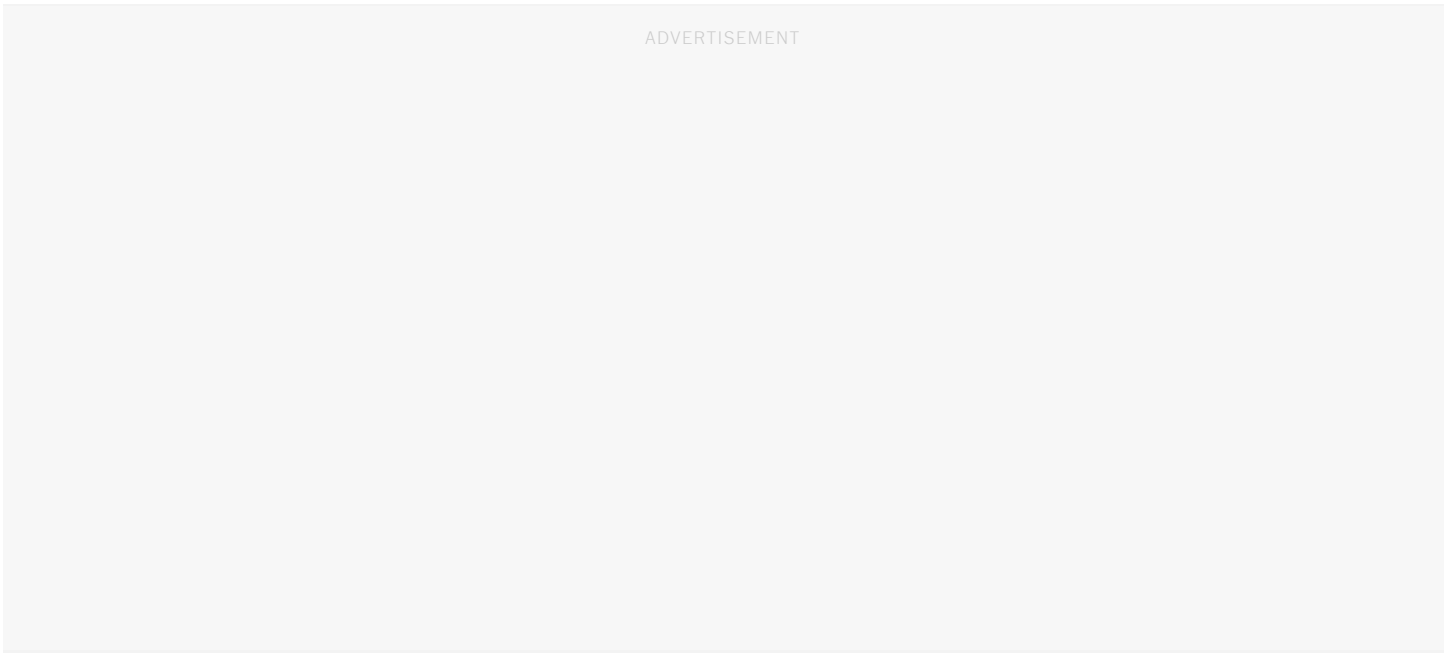
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